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**Anwar Sadat and the October War: The Strategy and Statecraft of a Twentieth
Century Pharaoh**

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Anwar Sadat and the October War The Strategy and Statecraft of a Twentieth Century Pharaoh

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the strategy and statecraft of Anwar Sadat with respect to the October 1973 war with Israel. Sadat's strategy will be examined using a classical approach to grand strategy. First, I will discuss the historical environment existing in 1972-73. Second, I will examine the international, domestic and psychological determinants of power affecting Sadat's strategic thinking. Third, I will undertake to speculate on how Sadat probably analyzed the national interests, threats to national interests, opportunities for improving the national interest, and the goals/objectives he selected in formulating his grand strategy. Fourth, the execution of Sadat's strategy using the traditional "tools of statecraft", including resort to war, will be examined. Finally, I will conclude with a brief assessment of Sadat as a grand strategist.

When Sadat stepped into Nasser's shoes as the next leader of Egypt, he took over the reins of a country that was flat on its back. Defeated and humiliated in the 1967 war with Israel, Egypt was broke. It had lost the Sinai and the use of the historic Suez Canal. The Israeli army sat on the east side of the canal behind a massive sand barrier and projected an aura of invincibility. No canal tolls were being collected and Sadat saw no new sources of revenue. There was no oil in Egypt or other significant economic resources. Sadat could not count on the Saudis giving money to Egypt forever, just because they were a "front-line state." In any event, the Saudi funds would never be enough to satisfy the "rising expectations" of the rapidly growing Egyptian population.

Sadat was faced with a strategic environment in which religious and cultural factors were predominant. To the Arabs, the 1967 defeat of their armies by Israel was a humiliation that had to be avenged. In short, the Arabs felt they had to regain their manhood, their "face", before any negotiations with Israel could take place across a table.¹ This face saving could only be achieved peacefully if the Israelis agreed to return to the *status quo antebellum*. Even then, their defeat had become so personalized that it is doubtful such a concession by the Israelis would have removed completely this stigma of loss of manhood from the Arab psyche. In the Arab world, an insult to personal honor is almost always avenged with some bloodletting before the "fatted calf" is slaughtered and peaceful coexistence re-established between tribes or families.

For their part, the Israelis would go only so far in relinquishing territories they had so recently conquered and which many religious Israelis felt was theirs by divine right. Faced with an overwhelming Arab population on all sides, Israeli strategic decision making was driven by the need for security. For the Israelis, security required some territorial depth to their defense so they had time to mobilize their forces in the event of an Arab attack. In short, the Israelis would never agree to the Arab demand for a return of all the conquered territories. For Sadat, faced with a population calling for blood to avenge its honor or the return of every inch of lost land, the Israeli negotiating position left him almost no room for diplomatic maneuver.²

Looking at the determinants of power, Sadat had little room for flexibility within the existing domestic, international and psychological "boxes" in which he found himself.

¹ O'Neill, Bard E. "The October War: A Political-Military Assessment," *Yale University Review* 25, no. 5 (July-August 1974): 32-35.

² O'Neill, "October War," 30.

Domestically, he successfully had taken over from Nasser, but he could not simply sit on the Pharaoh's throne without doing anything. With no improvement in the economy in sight, he would soon face a public that had the potential to turn against him with violence. Rising Islamic fundamentalism was a threat along with potential coups from the military. Time was running out for Sadat, unless he was able to change the political dynamic in the Middle East resulting from the 1967 war and improve the Egyptian economy.

On the international level, Egypt was seen as a "client" state of the Soviet Union. Israel's existence as a state was effectively guaranteed by the United States. Both U.S. public and private funds helped support the Israeli state. As opposed to Israel's support from the U.S., the Soviet Union had not significantly contributed to the Egyptian economy. There was even some legitimate concern on Sadat's part that the Soviets may have been supportive of unrest among the population in order to see a communist leader emerge over whom the Soviets might be able to exert more influence. Summing up the situation on the international level, Sadat could assume that the U.S. would never let Israel be pushed into the sea. Israel also would never be able to conquer Egypt because of Egypt's size and its huge population. There was never any threat to Cairo. On the other hand, Sadat was not getting much from his relationship with the Soviet Union. They were taking him for granted and supporting him because it allowed the Soviets to play in the Middle East as a "big power."³ Sadat could assume the Soviets believed they could do without Sadat as leader of Egypt.

Anwar el-Sadat *In Search of Identity: An Autobiography*, trans. by Harper and Row Publishers, Inc. (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 231.

Given the above determinants of power and the cultural environment of the Arab world, the situation called out for a strong leader who would take decisive action. The leader had to act both to change the domestic situation in Egypt by quelling the potential for dissent and to change the existing political dynamic in the Middle East. There was little time to act and Sadat rapidly was running out of it. After being Nasser's "poodle" for years, Sadat now had assumed the mantle of the pharaohs. He quickly quelled the opposition to his leadership and startled observers by displaying the traits of an "authoritarian personality."⁴ He showed a definite willingness to act.

After reviewing the environment in which strategic decisions must be taken and the existing determinants of power that feed into the decision making and execution of final strategy, the grand strategist usually looks first to what are the nation's interests. He or she then prioritizes these interests. For Sadat, as for most non-democratically elected leaders not in the habit of thinking about the nation state existing without them, the highest and most vital interest becomes staying in power. This is particularly true in the Middle East where the governments of almost all the Arab states have become highly personalized. The interests of the state become identified with the wishes and interests of the ruling president, king, or tribe. I believe we can safely assume this was Sadat's first and most vital interest. Of course to achieve this vital interest, Sadat would have to set objectives and goals that also would serve Egypt's vital interests. The two most vital interests for Egypt at that time were regaining Arab—specifically Egyptian honor, and to

⁴ Handel, Michael I. "Sadat and the Electric Shock Diplomacy," from *The Diplomacy of Surprise: Hitler's Vision, Sadat* (Harvard Studies in International Affairs, no. 44) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 242-3.

improve the economic well-being of Egypt. For the reasons stated above, the security of Egypt as a nation state was not really at issue.

In addition to the immediate threats directed personally against Sadat, the key threat to national interest arose from the *status quo*. If nothing was changed, the Israelis would continue to hold the Sinai, the canal would remain closed and its revenue forgone, Arab honor would remain unavenged, the economy would continue to stagnate with no help from the Soviet Union, and a new leader would emerge either from the Islamic left or the military and overthrow Sadat.

Opportunities to change the *status quo* were not present or on the horizon. Such opportunities would have to be made or created by Sadat or another leader. Since the Israelis were happy with the status quo, the only other leaders who could significantly change the situation were from the United States, the Soviet Union, or another front-line state like Syria. President Assad, however, could do very little to change the political dynamic on his own. He would not and could not act without Egypt.

Given the above national interests, threats and opportunities, Sadat had little choice except to set the following objectives/goals that would serve his personal and Egypt's national interests:

- regain control of the Suez Canal and start it operating and generating revenue,
- regain the Sinai and other lost Egyptian territories;
- regain Arab honor through achievement of the above two goals.

The above goals are low risk. They might be achieved by a diplomatic strategy, but in order to do so--given the Israeli position on the conquered lands--Sadat would first

have to get the United States and Soviet leaders involved in order to create the opportunity to achieve these objectives. Hence, we must accept that Sadat's first and immediate goal was to get the superpowers involved in Middle East diplomacy. If this could be achieved through diplomacy or a peaceful tool of statecraft, then his strategy remained low risk. To resort to war in order to involve the superpowers, the strategy would become high risk.

Since the likelihood of a peaceful engagement of superpowers in order to change the dynamic in the Middle East was by no means certain, Sadat considered early on that he might have to start a war in order to gain superpower involvement.⁵ Hopefully, such a war would allow him to achieve his other objectives before the superpowers got involved, but this would not be necessary if the superpowers became involved at some stage in the war and forced the necessary changes in the political and economic *status quo*.

As the leader of a front-line state whose forces faced Israel daily, Sadat knew that neither he nor any combination of Arab states would ever be able to eliminate Israel from the face of the earth. Even if the Arab states obtained the military means to push Israel into the Mediterranean, the United States would not allow it. Given this reality, Sadat's willingness to accept the possibility of what would be a limited war to achieve his goals implied a *de facto* acceptance of the State of Israel. Recognition of this makes it easier to understand how Sadat was able to travel later to Jerusalem and recognize Israel *de jure*. By accepting at the start a war limited to the goal of involving the superpowers in order to achieve his other objectives--none of which required or included the total elimination of Israel--Sadat had already crossed a major hurdle in the minds of most Arabs leading

⁵ Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, 238.

toward diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel. In so doing, Sadat demonstrated a grasp of a two basic elements of grand strategy. First, a statesman must set goals and objectives that are realistic and achievable given the determinants, the environment and the tools of statecraft with which you have to work. Secondly, you must think of what the possible endgame(s) will look like.

Picking up the first of the tools of statecraft from his toolbox, Sadat tried a diplomatic approach to getting the superpowers involved in changing the *status quo* in the Middle East. This approach came to a dead end when the USSR and the U.S., in their search for détente, basically agreed at a Summit in May 1972 to the *status quo* in the Middle East. As stated above, without superpower involvement, the Israeli and Arab positions remained mutually exclusive. While Sadat never gave up on his attempt to engage the superpowers without a resort to limited war, the time pressures working against Sadat forced him to move to the next tool of statecraft.

For the U.S. and most European countries, the next tool of statecraft would normally be an economic one. Either trade or financial sanctions such as a tariff, a quota, a freeze of financial assets or stopping all trade are the usual steps to getting the attention of the other state or of the world. For Sadat, the economic tool was unavailable. If Egypt had oil, or more likely, if the Suez canal had been operating, Sadat could have stopped traffic through the canal in order to engage the superpowers. Nasser used the economic tool when he seized the canal in 1956, although he engaged France, Britain, and Israel in a way that he probably had not intended. Nevertheless, a prestigious economic tool had

been available to Nasser. Sadat did not have this option. He had no choice but to move on to the next tool--limited war.

In planning for limited war, Sadat continued to make masterful use of the diplomatic tools of statecraft. These tools must not be neglected even as a statesman plans for the eventual war to come. Sadat brought Syria into his council so the war could become a two front war, thus reducing the Israeli forces that Egypt would have to face alone. He patched-up a shaking relationship with Libya. He continued to press for additional financial assistance from the wealthy Gulf oil states and lobbied those who had an economic weapon--oil--to use it against the West in order to more quickly engage the U.S. in the Middle East. At the United Nations, Egyptian diplomats pushed resolutions emphasizing the illegality of Israel's continued hold on the occupied territories. Egyptian diplomats worked with the non-aligned states also to isolate Israel.⁶

With respect to the Soviet Union, Sadat tried to exert as much diplomatic pressure as possible both to force the Soviets not to take Egypt for granted and to obtain the shipments of weapons and parts he needed for his limited war. Sadat first expelled all of the Soviet technicians and military assistance personnel. This action gave the Soviets a "wake-up" call that Egypt was not to be taken for granted. Shortly thereafter, Sadat permitted the Soviet-Egyptian agreement on the use of naval port facilities in Egypt to be renewed and extended. This "carrot-stick" approach caused high councils in the Kremlin to become disconcerted and did produce some additional shipments of long overdue arms to Egypt, albeit not in the quantity or of the quality that Sadat wished.

⁶ Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, 238-40.

Looking at Sadat's use of the military tool itself, the student of the October war is struck by the surprise and deception with which Egyptian forces were able to start the war. Although in hindsight the analyst can see that the facts are all there pointing toward the coming attack--as they were at Pearl Harbor--nevertheless, Sadat had managed to lull his opponent into a belief that the mobilization for the actual attack was yet another false warning of Arab bluster undertaken for domestic reasons.⁷ The deception was conducted on a strategic scale with Sadat sending false messages to third countries that he knew would be carried back to Israel, reinforcing their sense that regardless of what Sadat might say publicly or what they might pick up through military intelligence about mobilization, Sadat really had no intention of starting a war that he could not win.⁸

In preparing for the actual fighting, Sadat and the Egyptian military focused on obtaining the equipment and training to combat Israel's two greatest assets: air superiority and armored warfare (tanks). Through the acquisition of an air defense capability the Egyptians were able to destroy a large part of the Israeli air force in the first few days of the war. Anti-tank missiles carried by combat troops destroyed many of Israel's tanks before actual tank battles needed to be fought. Thus, with Israel's combat edge in planes and tanks seriously cut back, Egypt was able to increase the importance of its latent power, its infantry. Man-for-man the Israeli's will never be able to match the unlimited resources of the Egyptian infantry. Reducing the number of combat tanks and ground attack planes Israel could bring to the battle field tilted the balance of strength toward Egypt. Finally, Egyptian air attacks concentrated on the command and communications

⁷ Henry A. Kissinger, *Why We Were Surprised* (from *Years of Upheaval* (New York: Little Brown and Company, 1982), 459.

⁸ Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, 244-45.

centers of the Israeli forces deployed far forward in the Sinai. Cutting the communications from these forces to Tel Aviv prevented Israeli generals from knowing how serious the situation was in the Sinai.⁹

When we evaluate Sadat as a strategist and executor of his strategy via the tools of statecraft, he must come out with high marks. After being unable to engage the superpowers in the Middle East to change the *status quo*, he took decisive action to conduct a limited war. Although the decision to use the military tool was high risk, his objectives were realistic and achievable once the superpowers were engaged. He effectively used the diplomatic tools to isolate Israel and to persuade the Gulf Arabs to use the economic tools at their disposal via an oil boycott of the West. In the end, Sadat was able to achieve via a limited war the goals that he had initially attempted to achieve via diplomacy. Sadat remained in power until he was later assassinated by a religious fundamentalist group, but his successor has continued Sadat's basic economic and foreign policies.

On account of the successful prosecution of the war, Arab honor was restored and the canal was cleared and opened at no cost to Egypt. Military and economic assistance flowed into Egypt from the West. Sadat was acclaimed both internally and internationally as a world class statesman. So great was Sadat's prestige and leadership within Egypt that he was able not only to negotiate a peace face-to-face with the Israelis but he was able to disregard the opinions of other Arab states and fly to Jerusalem to recognize Israel. Putting Egypt's and, of course, his own interests first, Sadat played his hand well in the aftermath of the war to maximize the economic gains to Egypt vice getting mired in the

⁹ Sadat *In Search of Identity* 249-51

continued anti-Israel rhetoric of the other Arab states. In short, he cut a separate peace deal with Israel and abandoned Nasser's dream of pan-Arabism, at least for the present. Sadat was able to do this because he had more than achieved his strategic goals.

There are periodic decision or turning points in the course of history when pressures have the potential to rapidly build under a political or societal structure. These pressures may be internal, external, or a combination of both. If left without an escape, they have the potential to bring the society, and possibly others, down when they explode like a geyser. If the political leader recognizes the signs of the building forces, he or she can do one of two things. They can wait for a change in the political/economic dynamic, *i.e.*, do nothing, and hope the dynamic will change in time to relieve the pressures. Alternatively, the leader can attempt to force a change in the dynamic.

Sometimes a seemingly frozen political or economic dynamic will change and adjust easily of its own accord and pressures are released in time. Where an internal dynamic is at issue, a democratic country with a free market may have the flexibility to permit these changes in the dynamic to take place naturally in response to building pressures.¹⁰ However, if the political dynamic is more permanently frozen, as it often is in relations between countries, failure on the part of the leader to force a change or break the existing frozen dynamic is often fatal to the leader and sometimes to the society.

Faced with the forces of the Great Depression, Herbert Hoover decided to wait for the business cycle to change. Instead, the public changed the political dynamic by changing Presidents. Pressures from the Great Depression didn't lessen under Roosevelt.

¹⁰ The American Civil War was a result of an internally frozen political and economic dynamic within a democratic nation where the democratic institutions did not have the flexibility to allow for a release of pressure in time to prevent the explosion.

They actually got worse at one point. But Roosevelt kept the political dynamic moving by doing something all the time and appearing to force change. In the end he was saved with the coming of World War II and an actual change in the economic and political dynamic.

In a dictatorship, the results are usually more serious for the leader whose time runs out while waiting for a change in the dynamic. Tsar Nicholas II and Prime Minister Kerensky failed to force a change to the political dynamic and paid the price. Faced with the same set of circumstances, Lenin forced a change in the political dynamic by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and survived. Before World War II, German leaders had been trying for years to change the political status quo resulting from the Treaty of Versailles. As the economic situation deteriorated, pressures on the political system became greater. With an intransigent France and a disengaged America, German politicians in the Weimer Republic were unable to change the static political dynamic at the international level. Hitler forced a change in the international dynamic rather than go the same way as his predecessors as Chancellor.

Sadat's brilliance was in recognizing these building pressures and taking action to force a change in the static political dynamic when it became obvious that outside forces were not going to become involved to change this dynamic. Faced with a stalemated dynamic and building pressures, he set achievable goals based on the available means at his disposal and the actual political realities existing in the Middle East and then forced a change to the political and economic dynamic. The policy was high risk, but it was well executed and Sadat achieved his goals. The Pharaohs would have been proud.